OP-ED · OCTOBER THEME: LETTING GO, GENTLY

The Truth About Letting Go

It's rarely one clean decision. Here's what letting go actually feels like while you're in it.



BY RENÉE RIVERS, M.ED., LMHC, LPC, NCC

People talk about letting go like it's one clean decision. You see that something isn't working anymore, you release it, you move forward, and you feel lighter.

Sometimes that's how it goes. Often, though, letting go is messy. It's heavy, it hurts, and at first it can look nothing like peace.

As a therapist, I hear this part of the story all the time, and it's rarely the part people post about. I hear it from people ending relationships, and from people leaving a job they've outgrown, pulling back from a friendship, stepping out of a family role, or finally clearing a room they've avoided for years. I've lived it too.

This isn't about how to let go. It's about **what it feels like while you're in it.**

WHAT IT ACTUALLY FEELS LIKE

Letting go **can mean...**

01 Sitting with a decision you know you needed to make, and still wondering if it was the right one.

02 Missing something you know was hurting you.

03 Remembering the good parts, and briefly forgetting why you got so tired.

04 Wanting relief and familiarity at the same time.

05 Saying, "I can't keep doing this," then waking up the next morning wondering if you could have tried a little harder.

That's true whether you're letting go of a partner, a position you worked years to earn, a friend who only calls when they need something, or a habit that got you through a hard season. Anything that has started taking more than it gives.

That's the part we don't talk about enough.

SECTION ONE

You can know **and still hurt.**

We tend to expect our emotions to fall in line as soon as we know something needs to change. Usually they don't. Your mind can understand something long before your heart is ready to accept it.

YOU MAY KNOW
the relationship can't keep going the way it has.

YOU MAY KNOW
the job is costing you too much.

YOU MAY KNOW
the friendship has changed.

YOU MAY KNOW
an expectation was never realistic.

YOU MAY KNOW
a responsibility was never yours to carry.

YOU MAY KNOW
the version of you who got through one season can't be the one who carries you into the next.

You can know the job isn't healthy and still grieve the title, the routine, and the person you were there. You can know you've outgrown the role your family handed you, the fixer, the peacemaker, the one who holds it together, and still feel guilty setting it down. You can know the boxes in the garage aren't serving you and still feel a pang when you pick one up, because some of what we keep is really a way of keeping a person, a version of ourselves, or a time we're not ready to close.

You can know all of that and still grieve. Still question. Still be afraid. Still miss it.

Knowing doesn't erase grief. Sometimes it just shows you which way to walk, **and grief comes along for the walk.**

SECTION TWO

What coping **is really for.**

We often think coping skills are supposed to make hard feelings go away. That isn't really their job. Coping is how we get through the space between what we know and what we're finally able to live out.

The heaviness won't always feel this heavy. But while you're in it, you need ways to stay grounded so you don't make every decision from your most painful moment. That might look like:

01

Breathe, pray, or journal

when feelings run high

02

Move your body

to release what you're holding

03

Call someone safe

who won't rush your decision

04

Sleep on it before you respond

instead of reacting in the moment

05

Remember what actually happened,

not just what you miss

06

Add structure to your day

when your emotions feel chaotic

07

Focus on the next hour

instead of trying to figure out the next year

ACROSS EVERY KIND

Pause before the resignation email, take a walk before answering the family group chat, start with one drawer rather than the whole closet.

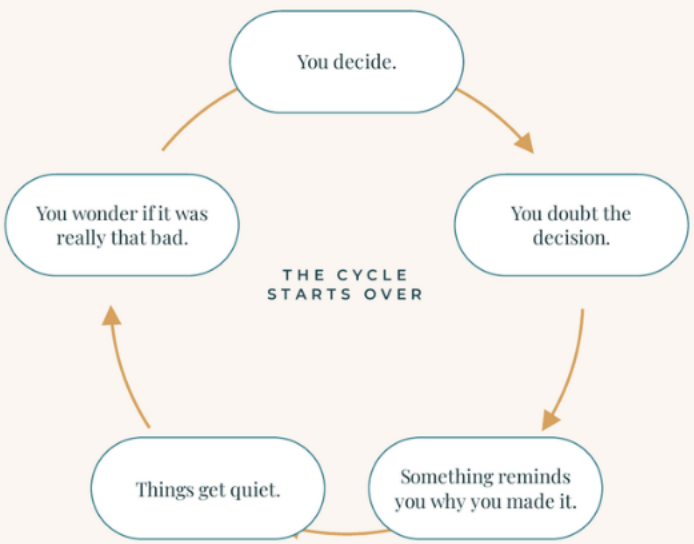
Coping doesn't mean the situation is okay. **It helps you stay steady enough to move through it.**

SECTION THREE

When you keep going **back and forth.**

For many people, the hardest part is the back-and-forth. Then the cycle starts over.

It doesn't only happen with partners. The job that drains you starts to look manageable after one good week. The friendship feels possible again after one warm text. The relative who crossed a line is kind at the holidays, and you wonder if you overreacted. The donation bags sit by the door for a month. The habit you set down feels harmless on a hard night.



This can be confusing, because we often read doubt as a sign that we should stay. It isn't always. **Sometimes doubt just means the decision comes with loss.**

Familiarity can also pull harder than peace, simply because it's known. If you've lived with instability long enough, calm can start to feel strange. That doesn't mean chaos is home. It means you spent so long adapting to chaos that peace takes some getting used to. The same is true of an always-on job, a family that runs on crisis, or a space so full you stopped seeing it. Quiet can feel like something is missing at first.

So don't automatically read discomfort as proof that you're going the wrong way. **Sometimes discomfort is what happens when you stop taking part in a pattern your whole life was built around.**

WHEN YOU'RE READY

Stepping out **of the cycle.**

One small step you can take again tomorrow.

1 START
Take one small step.
One drawer. One conversation. One boundary.

BREATHE
Let it feel rocky.
Discomfort isn't a wrong turn. 2

3 REFLECT
Notice what you carry.
Look at the pattern, not the promise.

HEAL
Honor what it meant.
Letting go doesn't mean it didn't matter. 4

5 FLOW
Make room for what's next.
Slip back? Start again with one small step.

Steps 3–5 continue with the Reflect, Heal, and Flow prompts on page 9.

SECTION FOUR

Look at the pattern, **not the promise.**

There are things we learn to put up with because we've put up with them for so long:

- the inconsistency
- the disappointment
- the arguing
- the overfunctioning
- the fixing
- the waiting
- the hoping
- the recovering
- "next time will be different"

That promise comes in many voices. At work, it's the promotion that keeps moving to next quarter. In families, it's "that's just how they are." In friendships, it's the apology that never changes anything. With clutter, it's "I'll deal with it this weekend." With habits, it's "I'll start Monday." Sometimes the promise is coming from someone else, and sometimes it's coming from you.

At some point, you have to ask yourself a hard question:

THE HARD QUESTION

If nothing changes, can I live with this outcome?

Don't answer based on potential, or on what someone says they're going to do, or on what you hope will happen. Answer based on the pattern you've actually lived. **Doing the same thing usually keeps getting some version of the same result.**

IF LEAVING DOESN'T FEEL SAFE

If the pattern you've lived in a relationship includes fear, control, threats, or violence, the question isn't only whether to leave. It's how to leave safely. The time around leaving can be the most dangerous part of an abusive relationship, so plan it with someone trained to help. The National Domestic Violence Hotline is confidential and there even if you're not ready to decide anything: **1-800-799-7233**, or text **START** to **88788**.

SECTION FIVE

Why we let go. **We shed to grow.**

Trees release their leaves every fall. It isn't loss. It's how living things make room.

A tree doesn't let go because something is wrong with it. It lets go so it can make it through the winter and grow again in spring. What falls feeds the ground, and the space left behind is where new growth comes in.

We work the same way. The relationship pattern, the role at work, the friendship that ran its course, the clutter in the corner, the habit that once kept us safe. Setting them down makes room for three things:

Renew

Making room for what's next.

When you stop pouring energy into what's draining you, it has somewhere new to go: a role that fits, a friendship that's mutual, a space you can breathe in.

Restore

Coming back to yourself.

Underneath the overfunctioning and the waiting is the person you were before you started holding everything together. Letting go gives you back your time, your peace, and your voice.

Revive

Letting what's been dormant come back to life.

The goals you shelved, the joy you put on hold, the parts of you that went quiet to survive. Like spring, they were never gone. They were waiting for room.

And trees don't shed all at once. Leaves turn, loosen, and fall over weeks, in their own time. You're allowed that same pace.

Letting go doesn't mean it didn't matter. **It means you're making room for what grows next, gently.**

TAKE IT WITH YOU

Before you set it down, **sit with these.**

October's theme is Letting Go, Gently. Use these prompts across the week, one at a time, at your own pace.



REFLECT

What have I been carrying so long that I stopped asking if it was still mine to hold?



HEAL

What needs to be grieved or honored before I can begin to release it?



FLOW

What becomes possible if I stop requiring the whole answer before taking the next step?

FOLLOW @reflecthealflow

Reflect. Heal. Flow Forward.

October is also Domestic Violence Awareness Month. If you don't feel safe in a relationship, support is available 24/7: call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or text START to 88788. This piece is for education and reflection and is not a substitute for therapy.

LOOKING AHEAD

Make room **for what's next.**

Imagine for a moment that something really did change. Not everything. Not overnight. But enough that your life began to feel more like your own.

01

What would be different?

Think about your environment, relationships, work, routines, home, and support.

02

How would you want to feel?

Peaceful? Free? Grounded? Energized? Safe? Connected? Hopeful? Clear?

03

Who are you becoming?

What version of you emerges when you stop carrying what no longer fits?

04

What do you want to build, experience, or pursue?

Write the dream, even if you don't know how you'll get there yet.

05

Why does it matter now?

What makes this worth moving toward in this season?

Go after it **gently. Safely. Intentionally.**

You don't have to rush into a new life just because you're releasing an old one. You're allowed to build what comes next one honest step at a time.

OPTIONAL · VISION BOARD

Create a "What I'm Making Room For" board. Use words, photos, colors, quotes, scriptures, textures, or symbols for how you want your next season to *feel*, not just look.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meet Renée Rivers.

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Renée Rivers is a licensed mental health counselor, speaker, consultant, and advocate with more than two decades of experience in mental health, youth advocacy, and leadership development. Through her work, she creates space for honest conversations about emotional wellness, personal growth, and the experiences that shape how we navigate life and leadership.

As founder of Reflective Rivers Therapy & Consulting, Renée brings clinical expertise and a deeply human approach to helping individuals and organizations strengthen their well-being. Her work centers on healthier people, stronger communities, and spaces where people feel seen, supported, and equipped to thrive.

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